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# **“The Majority has Spoken”: Performing Referenda at the National Theatre**

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**Abstract**

*The Majority* was performed at the National Theatre of Great Britain in August 2017. Ostensibly a one-man show, written and performed by Rob Drummond and directed by David Overend, the play explores democracy, dissent and abstention through the story of the author's challenging encounter with a far-left activist in rural Scotland. Utilising audience voting technology to intersperse and inform the narrative with a series of 'mini referenda', the play cautions against shouting at each other across the void, instead advocating a more measured, considered and open approach to engaging with those with whom we disagree. Based on an analysis of in-performance audience participation data, this article identifies unexpected correlations and reveals hidden trends and tendencies. It argues that voting theatre operates as a temporary space from which to test, interrogate and rehearse the wider processes of electoral politics. However, the article also considers the productive tensions at play between the reductive binary of the votes and their affective and emotional context. This complicates a straightforward comparison of the 'social performances' of voting in theatre to voting in elections and referenda.

**Key words:** Brexit, Rob Drummond, electoral theatre, referenda, voting

# **“The Majority has Spoken”: Performing Referenda at the National Theatre**

## **1. Introduction**

*The Majority* was performed on the National Theatre of Great Britain’s Dorfman stage in London’s South Bank in August 2017. Ostensibly a one-man show, written and performed by Rob Drummond and directed by David Overend, the performance addressed audiences seated on all sides of the auditorium around a circular stage beneath a central hive-like projection surface and several monitors suspended above the seating banks. Issued with electronic handsets, spectators were invited to participate by voting YES or NO on a series of propositions, which interspersed Drummond’s monologue. These ranged from a decision on whether or not to admit latecomers, to the revelation of sensitive information pertaining to characters in the story. The votes tested the audiences’ moral and ethical boundaries, influenced the progression of the narrative, and facilitated a theatrical experiment in collective decision making. This article is concerned with the statistical data that were generated over the course of 20 performances, asking what they reveal about how audiences engaged with, and occasionally rejected, the invitation to participate through the casting of votes.

*The Majority* was conceived as a response to the United Kingdom (UK)’s recent decision to leave the European Union (EU). The spectre of Brexit loomed over proceedings and Drummond’s individual experience was offered as a post-referenda morality tale for the ages. The story is set in Scotland, a country that had voted to remain part of the UK in 2014 with a majority of 55%, and in favour of remaining in the EU two years later with 62% of the Scottish vote (Electoral Commission, 2017). However, the play aims to transcend this political

specificity, reaching beyond its contribution to the Brexit debate and its response to the diversity of British attitudes towards Europe, to ask wider questions about identity politics, liberalism, tolerance and the limits of violence. The play sets out to challenge those who rest too comfortably in their identity and may benefit from listening more to what others have to say.

Presented as a 'more or less' true autobiographical account of his journey to the highlands to meet far-left activist Eric Ferguson, the protagonist recounts his journey to an anti-immigration rally in Aberdeen, where he is arrested for punching a supposed neo-Nazi protester for no other reason than his political stance. This causes him to reassess the value of attacking those with whom we disagree, and ultimately, the play cautions against shouting at each other across the void. *The Majority* ends with an invitation to continue the debate initiated in the performance, and many audience members joined Drummond in the foyer to reflect on their votes and to debate the performer's provocation to 'disagree better!'. These discussions were often well attended and highly charged, and many responded passionately to the subject of the final vote, arguing against the reductive binary of the referendum on the value of 'abusing someone for holding an opinion', or defending their decision to vote positively on this proposition.

The fervour of these post show discussions, which spilled over into printed and digital media, can in part be explained by recent political events. On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2017 – the day of the second preview performance – at a far-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a car was driven into a crowd, injuring several people engaged in peaceful protests, and killing 32-year-old civil rights activist, Heather Heyer. This incident appeared to significantly affect the way that the narrative of the performance was received. *The Majority* was intended as a timely response to a changing political landscape, but the shocking immediacy of Charlottesville highlighted the play as an ideological response to contemporary political

crises and complicated responses to the play's central message on disagreement and dissensus. The play's focus on white nationalism was emphasised in this context and its call to debate, rather than attack, was seen by some to imply moral equivalence between activists on both sides (Billington 2017).

Taking these concerns seriously, this article explores the ways in which audiences engaged with the provocative theatrics of *The Majority*, using the data to indicate a range of specific responses. Addressing the problem of equivalence, we argue for the value of testing the limits of oppositional politics in the staged democratic forum of the theatre. To frame these processes and relationships theatrically invites a different quality of engagement with electoral politics. This allows a playful and experimental reassessment of its potential in a constructed space that is removed but intricately connected to the world outside the theatre. Importantly, in this performance, both the soft liberalism of the protagonist and the mechanism through which this is either upheld or rejected by the audience are brought into question. Initially, this takes place through the device of the referenda and the option to affirm, deny or abstain from voting on the series of propositions. This mode of audience participation is problematised from the beginning, and its limitations prompt an alternative dynamic as the audience are then invited to engage directly with the performer. These different modes of engagement can be understood as attempts to incorporate the ideas and opinions of the audience into the performance text.

Liz Tomlin (2018) identifies a recent trend in contemporary theatre to foreground the voices of 'real people' in political discourse, whether through the use of verbatim accounts of those involved in the Brexit debate (as with the National Theatre's *My Country: a work in progress* (2017)), or through participatory voting structures (as with Rimini Protokoll's *100% City* (2008 -)). Tomlin critiques a tendency for some of these productions to endow the subjective and unsubstantiated opinions of individuals with an unchallenged authority.

According to Tomlin, this kind of endorsement of the individual mirrors the uncritical foregrounding of the perceived authenticity of 'non-experts' in purportedly anti-elitist politics, as with 'the current right-wing rhetoric of populist demagogues' (238).<sup>1</sup> The use of 'real people' in contemporary theatre is generally intended as a response to the dominance of privileged authorial perspectives, achieved through the incorporation of multiple voices and political positions from beyond the apparently homogenous world of subsidised theatre audiences, such as those of the National Theatre. However, while 'more often playful than malign', such works risk bolstering the reach and influence of individualised perspectives that are 'severed from any ideological context, and protected, by virtue of their authenticity and non-expert status, from critical challenge or debate' (235; 241). In certain contexts, this can have the effect of reinforcing their validity and giving weight to narratives that should be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as any other ideological position.

Alert to these 'risks', *The Majority* was concerned with the potential of political theatre to construct a space of contestation. It also aimed to acknowledge the given demographic of the theatre audience, rather than attempting to represent an absent electorate. Citing Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford (2016), Tomlin points out that 'real' voices are often 'defined by their "social class differences" from an anticipated, predominantly middle-class audience' (2019, 237). On one hand, this strategy can bring a greater diversity of experiences into the theatre, which can productively challenge 'the prevalence of middle-class, white men in the forefront of the playwriting profession' (235). But on the other, all too often, the disparity in socio-economic privilege is adopted as the implicit criterion to qualify any subjective political *vox populi* for a platform. *The Majority* used a different

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<sup>1</sup> While Tomlin's argument responds directly to the rhetoric of the Brexit Leave campaign, such as that of Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Gove, it can also be applied to wider trends in global politics, evident in the political tactics of world leaders such as Donald Trump.

strategy, as the audience's votes were framed as the subjective positions of a particular group (those of the self-identified 'liberal' audiences of the National Theatre). In order to acknowledge and quantify the audience profile from the beginning of the performance, early in the performance, a series of questions were asked to determine the specific demographic at each performance. This strategy, which we discuss later as an important framework for the event that followed, aimed to encourage a critical sensitivity to the 'problem' of representation from the outset, which informed the subsequent exploration of voting.

*The Majority* set up a tension between the tacit and affective dimensions of electoral processes, as experienced through the contested politics of Drummond's narrative; and the statistical reductivism offered through the options of the votes. For Stephen Coleman, 'less tangible, quantifiable or even rationally explicable flows of affect are no less characteristic of democracy as it is experienced than exit polls, swings and vote-seat ratios' (2013, 33). Investigating the 'social performances' of voting in a theatrical context allowed the production to work with the audience to playfully deconstruct its systems and processes. It was hoped that the dramatic energy that resulted from this charged environment, which opened up a space for frustration and dissent, would usefully inform engagement with the political events that contextualised the performances. However, while the use of voting in *The Majority* can be seen as analogous to electoral voting, the overtly theatrical context of performance may be a significant factor in influencing audience responses (Coleman, 2015; Hollweg, 2015). We therefore engage with debates in the field of participatory and immersive theatre to take into account the specific conditions of the theatre experience.

The data, which were generated by 7235 audience members over the course of a three-week run, present a rare opportunity to quantify an audience's engagement with a play using information generated from within the performance. This allows us to extend typical



methods of audience reception studies, such as exit surveys and audience questionnaires, to build a specific and detailed picture of the audience's role in a performance. The quantity and detail of the data calls for an original approach to understanding audience participation that compares different audiences' responses across the duration of a run, rather than limiting analyses to one often randomly selected iteration of a performance. Comparing votes across the weeks of the run, we are able to identify unexpected correlations and to reveal hidden trends and tendencies. By bringing this data analysis into dialogue with the qualitative insights offered by a critical commentary on the performance, we explore the complex – and sometimes ambiguous – response of the show's audiences, involving individual and collective agency, abstention and dissent. We employ this experimental multi-method approach to examine *The Majority* as a creative response to the problems of polarisation in the context of large-scale political events such as Brexit.

## 2. Voting Theatre

Voting has been utilised in several interactive theatre productions in recent years. Many of these performances have attempted to hand over a degree of agency to the audience, whose votes determine, or constitute, the outcome of the drama. Examples include: Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night* (2013), a popularity contest between electoral candidates; James Graham's *Quiz* (2017), an audience-as-jury investigation of Army Major Charles Ingram's conviction for cheating on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*; and Ferdinand von Schirach's *Terror* (2017), the trial of a German fighter pilot who shot down a hijacked passenger plane to prevent a larger tragedy. The use of voting in these productions has the effect of marking key moments of audience interaction, rendering them explicit and foregrounding the decision-making process that is involved in participation.

In many of these productions, the invitation for the audience to perform agency interrupts the conventional mode of collective spectatorship with an individual declaration of intent. In the case of *Fight Night*, this regularly culminates in members of the audience opting to reject the system by walking out of the theatre. Others, including *Quiz* and *Terror*, stage a democratic selection process, using voting to quantify the audience's engagement with the performance as they pass judgement on the characters in the drama. In such examples, vote-based theatre has an inherently metatheatrical quality, which can polarise critical reception of the work. These votes draw attention to hidden theatrical conventions by momentarily shifting the relationship between performers and audiences. This is a complex action which opens up the theatrical experience to a range of feelings of pleasure, frustration, inclusion and disengagement. Translating this emotional terrain to a quantifiable metric is necessarily reductive but, as with *The Majority*, this problem has occasionally been used strategically as a dramaturgical counterpoint to the nuance, complexity and multiplicity that such metrics routinely obscure.

As Coleman points out, the apparent *commensurability* achieved through voting is only possible through disconnection from the emotional terrain that informs it:

This reductive strategy truncates information processing and conjures into being notions of universality where sameness or even similarity is far from obvious. In the social performance of voting, many and diverse interests, preferences and values are aggregated into a commensurable 'result', regardless of the varying and inconsistent motives, rationales, misunderstandings and intensities of commitment of individual voters. In order to make votes seem like a commensurable expression of desire, the nuance, texture and history of desire must be substituted by whatever can be enunciated through numbers. (2013, 30)

Acknowledging the discrepancies and actual *incommensurability* that voting obscures can challenge the assumed homogeneity of the majority, revealing the precarity of a dominant group constituted by internal divisions and fluid allegiances. Coleman cites John Durham Peters, who suggests that 'democracy establishes justice and legitimacy through a social

force, *the majority*, which exists only by way of math' (2001, p. 434, emphasis added).

Coleman therefore promotes a recognition of the complexity of voter experience and intentions, and stresses the value of *narrative* as an important corollary to the statistical approaches favoured in much political commentary and analysis. This is the dual methodology that we have adopted for this article, which analyses the data generated by the successive audiences' votes in *The Majority*, while considering these results in their narrative and theatrical context. Here, performance analysis, close reading of media sources, and the personal insight of the director combine to demonstrate how an understanding of the relationship between creative intention and audience reception can be brought to bear on a reading of the results of these votes.

Comparing voting in electoral politics to voting in a theatrical setting, it is tempting to assume equivalence (Badiou, 2013; Bottoms, 2015). However, while there is certainly value in considering the experience of voting *as* a performance – 'a political practice and ritual that is often accompanied by a multiplicity of conflictual feelings, expectations, hopes, and anxieties' (Hollweg 2015, 178) – it is important to acknowledge that theatrical and electoral voting are not the same thing. In fact, key differences problematise any attempt to draw political conclusions from theatrical constructs, however inherently theatrical politics may appear.

First, the choice and wording of the propositions highlights one of the key differences between votes in electoral and theatrical contexts. The content of ballot papers is very carefully considered, designed where possible to avoid the influence of ambiguity, order effects and partisan allegiances (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014). In the context of referenda, which are increasingly used with divisive effect to determine government policy, wording can be particularly contentious and involves a high level of scrutiny to limit

misinterpretation (Rocher and Lecours 2017, p. 326). This scrutiny and precision are also practiced widely in social sciences where the design of questionnaires and surveys is a significant methodological consideration (Dolnicar, 2013; Gillham, 2008). In contrast, the questions put to voters in *The Majority* were subjective, provocative and polarising, chosen for their dramatic impact and thematic relevance rather than their fairness or objectivity.

Second, in the playful and performative space of the theatre, the likelihood of audiences voting in line with their 'real' political positions may be significantly decreased. Removed from the responsibility of effecting real change to the political environment beyond the theatre, the opportunity to take up provocative or directly oppositional positions – to the benefit or hindrance of the performance, or simply to see what happens – becomes a real possibility. Theatre can be usefully understood as a Foucaultian heterotopia – an *other space* that operates separately from the realm of the quotidian, offering a position from which to test, challenge and rehearse 'everyday' ideas and behaviours (Foucault, 1984). In electoral theatre, when the experience is framed by notions of play, fiction, creativity and pretence, the act of voting may be radically recoded.

When political theatre uses voting, it constructs a temporary space to reveal, complicate and comment on the social performances of civic participation, while paradoxically employing the crude mechanisms of the systems that it often sets out to critique. While they explore the emotional context of voting, plays like those mentioned above flirt dangerously with the dissatisfaction that arises from this quantitative reductionism. Theatre can expose the 'seductive alchemy' of electoral politics (Coleman, 2013, p. 30), but in so doing it can generate frustrations of its own when the agency of the audience is experienced as staged or inauthentic. *The Majority* did not escape this criticism and was felt by some to be limited in its use of the voting devices. The production openly obscured heterogeneity by

reducing individual identity to its representation by the majority, and limited agency through the binary choice of the votes. These strategies were used in order to prompt a consideration of alternative democratic models as the play progressed. The intention was to highlight the limitations of voting and the incommensurability of the 'social force' of the majority.

In the remainder of this article, we offer an interpretation of the results of *The Majority* that draws comparisons between theatrical and electoral voting without collapsing these two distinct social performances. While the theatricality of the data prevents us from drawing firm conclusions or making claims about the efficacy of the performance, we nonetheless suggest that a measure of participatory engagement can be inferred from the results of the vote. We refer to the data as theatrical to indicate that while they offer a precise and detailed reflection of the audiences' response, they nonetheless emerge from a specific artistic context that consciously blurs the lines between truth and fiction. The ambiguous status of facts in the autobiographical details and staged scenarios of *The Majority* was partly a response to the age of 'post truth politics', in which the misrepresentation of facts is a particular concern in large scale referenda such as Brexit (Rose 2017). By staging and destabilising the appearance of objective and 'fair' seeming outcomes in the play, a comment was made on the political fictions that increasingly infect democratic processes. The ambiguous status of the data therefore opens up a space for reflecting on the broader challenges of engaging with opposing positions within the polarising framework of referenda and electoral politics.

### **3. Data and Methods**

The data that we use in this article come from a series of audience votes that were

conducted in each performance. For each vote the audience were presented with a proposition and invited to select a button on their electronic handset indicating either YES or NO. Data were also recorded on whether or not they abstained from the vote (although for reasons of dramatic clarity, this information was not declared during the actual performances). Over the course of a three-week run there were 20 separate performances, with an average of 362 people at each show, ranging from a low of 329 to a high of 385. Our units of analysis are the aggregated responses to each of the votes in each of the performances.

**Insert figure 1. Rob Drummond presents the results of an audience vote © Ellie Kurtz**

Importantly, throughout the performance, the results of the referenda were immediately displayed on screens around the auditorium (see Figure 1). This confronted individuals with a visual representation of their decision in relation to the rest of the audience, which indicated whether they were part of the majority or minority for each scenario. Results often elicited gasps when they were unexpected, or murmurs of approval – or even applause – when they appeared to validate a decision. In these instances of performed response, the audience had an opportunity to align themselves with other voters in the ‘here and now’ of the event. In the typical ballot box system of electoral politics, with deferred results (often watched on television in private residences) this communal performance of voter identity is precluded.

Unlike performances that require a visible commitment from members of the audience (voting by raising hands or moving to different areas of the stage, for example), the use of electronic voting pads in *The Majority* afforded a degree of anonymity. There is evidence to suggest that in elections, a sense of anonymity is eroded by doubts about secrecy of ballots and a tendency for voters to disclose choices beyond the ballot box (Gerber et al. 2013).

Indeed, it appeared that some audience members shared their choices with those seated around them or conferred in the brief time between the proposition and the closure of the voting window. Nonetheless, through the use of voting pads and low lighting, along with the aggregated presentation of results, the production avoided drawing attention to individuals. Whether or not this increased the likelihood of respondents revealing their 'real' positions, the effect was to reduce hundreds of individual responses to their collective status in relation to the majority.

#### 4. Performing the Majority

Various pleasures and frustrations resulted from the playful subversion of votes on latecomer policy – and later on whether or not to have a toilet break – along with more ethically compromising decisions, such as the choice to 'dox' Drummond's online antagonist on a far-right media site by posting personal information about him. As discussed in the following section, *The Majority* also included an escalating set of scenarios that brought 'the trolley problem' into juxtaposition with Drummond's unfolding narrative. This popular philosophical thought experiment involves a set of moral choices on saving someone tied to a hypothetical trainline; interrogating how far we would be willing to go to avert a runaway train cart (Foot, 1967). In all cases, the *performance* of voting was not limited to active declarations via the electronic handsets: it also played out in individual and collective responses to the results as they were displayed.

Near the beginning of *The Majority*, a series of 'quick-fire' referenda were used to determine the demographic of the audience:

Now, before we continue I'd like to get a rough idea of who today's community is. So, if you could please answer YES or NO to the following propositions as they relate to you personally.

*Rob asks a series of questions which may include some or all of the following.*

**I am a liberal.**

**I am white.**

**I am male.**

**I am a social media user.**

**I believe voting should be mandatory.**

**I believe violence is sometimes the answer.**

**I believe in absolute freedom of speech.**

**I believe I can make a difference.**

*Rob collates the results in their entirety and creates a profile for the community.  
Something like ...*

We have a majority of liberal, white, non-male, social media users. This community believes voting should be mandatory and violence is sometimes the answer. This community believes in freedom of speech. This community believes they can make a difference.

That is who you are.

The majority has spoken.

(Drummond, 2017b, p. 7)<sup>2</sup>

By asking the audience to mark their identity at the start of the show, a direct statement was made about who would be calling the shots. This was a provocation that highlighted the divisions and the inevitable rejection of the minority opinions, but also set up an 'in crowd' that the production then set out to disrupt and challenge. Drummond and Overend often work with rehearsal audiences to test ideas and develop strategies for audience engagement (Overend, 2018). During these open rehearsals, this part of the performance was given careful attention and some participants had strong reactions to being asked to identify themselves in this way. Retaining the frustration that this caused, which sometimes seemed to border on anger, was a risky strategy. The script was worded carefully, and the pace and tone of the performance were given a lot of attention. But the temptation to remove this section was avoided as it was considered important to engage the audience directly with the problem of majority rule early in the performance. These were the

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<sup>2</sup>Quotations from the script are taken from the unpublished production script, which is significantly different to the version that as published before the show opened (Drummond, 2017a).



questions that the play set out to grapple with and by the end the aim was to suggest possible solutions.

This section also had an important function in its consciously problematic use of subjective terms, presented out of context and put forward for a vote without the opportunity to explore their ambiguity. Terms like 'liberal' are open to interpretation and likely to mean different things to different people. While audiences may align liberalism with its fundamentals – 'political consensus, agreement, and harmony' (Sleat 2015, p. 3) – it is in the correlating modalities of open-mindedness, sensitivity to alternative perspectives and willingness to adapt that a truly liberal ethos is located. Furthermore, the antonym, 'illiberal', which for some may be implied by a NO vote, is not one that is likely to be embraced even by those who are cautious of aligning themselves with the 'liberal elite'. This vote was soon followed by a proposition on belief in 'absolute freedom of speech'. Again, definition or interrogation of this term were prevented by the format. By using the controversial prefix 'absolute', the inadequacy of the binary vote to address complexity was foregrounded, and for the first time, a dynamic of frustrated contestation was created within the liberal majority. The intended effect of these specific votes, then, was to unsettle the majority and to demonstrate how a lack of nuance in political allegiances can obscure the variegated ideological composition of majority identity. Significantly, in summarising the votes, Drummond subtly dropped the term 'absolute' from 'freedom of speech'. This added a further frisson of discomfort as the possibility of misrepresentation was suggested. On more than one occasion, audience members made a vocal objection to this slippage of terminology.

On the whole 'the majority' was the same in each performance (white, liberal and non-male), though its relative size varied somewhat (Table 1). Despite being overwhelmingly liberal, there was only limited support for absolute freedom of speech ('very liberal'

Drummond quipped). This perhaps indicates that audiences were already prepared to put boundaries on what opinions they found acceptable to air.

Table 1. Audience demographics

| Variable                                   | Performances | % Yes | Std. Dev. | Min | Max |
|--|--------------|-------|-----------|-----|-----|
| I am a liberal                             | 20           | 66.3  | 5.77      | 58  | 78  |
| I am white                                 | 20           | 68.5  | 6.36      | 56  | 79  |
| I am male                                  | 20           | 33.7  | 5.22      | 17  | 43  |
| I am a social media user                   | 20           | 47.3  | 9.67      | 30  | 63  |
| I believe voting should be mandatory       | 20           | 41.3  | 5.47      | 31  | 49  |
| I believe violence is sometimes the answer | 20           | 33.1  | 4.83      | 20  | 42  |
| I believe in absolute freedom of speech    | 20           | 27.4  | 3.96      | 18  | 34  |
| I believe I can make a difference          | 20           | 58.8  | 4.90      | 49  | 67  |

To the extent that these votes can be taken as reflective of the ‘real’ identity and opinions of the audience (and given our earlier point about the theatrical context, we acknowledge that this is by no means a given), they offer a sort of socio-political base line against which to assess the shifts and turns in engagement with the rest of the performance. This informs our examination of the varying level of abstentions as questions became more complex or challenging later in the performance, and also allows us to infer shifting perspectives and moral positions as the drama plays out.

## 5. The Trolley problem

A key strand of *The Majority* was the series of votes on the ‘trolley problem’. At key points in the narrative, the aesthetic of the production shifted dramatically with a signature train

sound motif bringing a sense of foreboding into the space, along with a tight spot in place of the 'game-show' lights of the regular voting sections, and the introduction of a live feed camera which picked up Drummond in close up from various corners of the space, projecting his image onto the monitors and the circular hive-like structure suspended above the playing space (Figure 2). Drummond delivered the trolley scenarios directly to the camera allowing a subtle, precise performance that registered a combination of enjoyment and consternation at the increasingly complex decisions that were put to the audience.

**Insert figure 2: Rob Drummond presents the trolley problem © Ellie Kurtz**

Perhaps because of its relevance to wider political decisions such as Brexit, the Trolley Problem has achieved a phenomenal online presence in recent years, and it has been referenced in various theatre, film and television texts. In most versions, including *The Majority*, the initial premise is broadly similar:

There is a runaway train car heading towards five railway workers. There's no time to warn them. They will die if it hits them. You are standing by a lever which, when pushed, will send the train car onto a siding on which there is a single workman. If you push the lever he will die, but the five workers will be saved.

What is the correct decision?

The proposition is this ...

**This community would push the lever.**

(Drummond 2017b, p. 11)

Subsequently, as Drummond repeatedly returned to this strand, the scenario shifted in connection to developments in the narrative. Each time the audience was asked to vote on the proposition to push the lever, but the details changed, adding greater complexity and moral ambiguity. The further scenarios were as follows:

There is a runaway train car heading towards five railway workers. There's no time to warn them. They will die if it hits them. You are standing on a bridge with a large fat man. If you push this man off the bridge his girth would be enough to stop the train car. He would die but the five workers would be saved.

There is a runaway train car heading towards five railway workers. There's no time to warn them. They will die if it hits them. You are standing by a lever which, when pushed, will send the train car onto a siding on which stands ... your child. If you push the lever your child will die but the five workers will be saved.

There is a runaway train car heading towards five non-violent Nazis (they hold the views without committing violence). There's no time to warn them. They will die if it hits them. You are standing by a lever which, when pushed, will send the train car onto a siding on which stands a normal left wing voter. If you push the lever you will kill the voter but the five Nazis will be saved.

(Drummond, 2017b, pp. 15, 25, 29)

The results of these votes suggest a complex negotiation of beliefs and ethical positions, which resulted in a slight increase in abstention over the first four questions, as it became increasingly difficult to take a clear stance on the escalating scenarios (Table 2). This was not upheld in the final trolley vote, which offered a simpler option:

There is a runaway train car heading towards no-one. There is no need to do anything. No-one will die if the train continues. You are standing by a lever which, when pushed, will send the train car onto a siding on which stands one neo-Nazi. If you push the lever they will die. (Drummond, 2017b, p. 42)

**Table 2. The Trolley Problem: This community would...**

|         | Push the lever to kill a worker and save 5 lives | Push a fat man to his death and save 5 lives | Push the lever to kill your child and save 5 lives | Push the lever to kill a voter and save 5 Nazis | Push the lever to kill a Nazi and save no one |
|---------|--|--|--|---|---|
| Yes (%) | 57   | 24   | 9  | 34  | 7   |
| No (%)  | 19   | 52   | 61   | 36  | 71  |

|             |    |    |    |    |    |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Abstain (%) | 24 | 24 | 30 | 30 | 22 |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|

On average the audience would rather save five Nazis by killing someone in a detached way through pulling a lever than to save five workers by killing someone in a more personal way through pushing a fat man to his death. This is in keeping with Judith Thomson's (1976) application of the trolley problem, in which she argues that there is an important moral difference between doing something to a thing (the trolley) to avert an existing threat (the crash); and doing something to a person (the fat man) to create a new threat (his death), regardless of the additional lives saved.

Liberal audiences had a relatively utilitarian outlook when it came to pushing the lever to kill one person and save five lives, but this did not stand up when faced with sacrificing a fat man. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which depicts the relationship between how liberal any given audience was and how willing they were to either push the lever to save the Nazis (left panel) or push the fat man to save the workers (right panel). The scattered dots indicate that there was quite a lot of variation between audiences. Overall though, from the upward slant of the line in the left panel we can see that there was a general trend for more liberal audiences to be more willing to pull the lever to save the Nazis. However, this was not the case for whether audiences were prepared to push the fat man.

### **Insert figure 3: Liberal responses to the Trolley Problem**

For the final trolley problem scenario, 7% voted for this option after it was made clear that the single neo-Nazi held beliefs that they had never acted on. This section of the audience

therefore opted to murder someone because of their ideology. Dramaturgically, this vote served as an important stepping stone towards the final proposition. Given the theatrical context and the likely disparity between the hypothetical vote and a real-life situation, it is possible that this figure was exaggerated by its context, which may have been heightened by the events in Charlottesville. Nonetheless, this vote indicated that a minority would be willing to kill someone who had opposing views to their own. From this point in the play, the denouement of Drummond's narrative, and the remaining time left for him to address the audience directly, were focused on challenging this position and proposing an alternative approach to disagreement.

The series of trolley problems offers a forum for testing the problem of moral equivalence, which is never resolved in *The Majority*. In the play, this is used as a retort to the political tactics used by some sections of the purportedly liberal Left, which arguably mirror the political violence routinely used by far-right populism. As Richard Shorten points out, this strategy amounts to moral relativism, and 'leads to moral ambiguity in the place of certainties and the blurring of distinctions that ordinarily apply' (2011, p. 197). In a sense, this was the intention and the increasingly morally complex scenarios effectively eroded certainties and distinctions, which is one possible reason for the gradual increase in abstention. However, the starkness of the final trolley scenario may have worked against this by implying equivalence between the violence against an individual with a far-right ideology and the violence perpetrated by such individuals. In the show's plea for more constructive forms of disagreement, the play did not take a clear position on the differences in morality on either side. Moral ambiguity was not necessarily a helpful strategy here and the show might have benefitted from a clearer elucidation of its own ideological position in

relation to the extreme far-right, particularly in the days and weeks following Charlottesville.

## 6. Brexit, Liberalism and the voice of the minority

In the final act of *The Majority*, the timeline of Drummond's narrative catches up with the UK's recent referendum on membership of the EU. At this point, Drummond breaks from the progression of the story to replay this vote: **'This community believes that the UK should leave the EU'** (Drummond, 2017b, p. 37). Predictably, considering the typical demographic of a National Theatre audience, the majority vote was *always* for Remain. Across the 20 performances the average level of support for Remain was 70%, with a low of 61% and a high of 77%. Less predictably, as the results came in, during several performances the audience broke into a round of self-affirming applause, with the occasional shout of approval. As Dan Rebellato (2017) suggests in his blog entry on *The Majority*, 'perhaps a lot of our political engagement is like this audience, applauding one another for correctly holding our beliefs'.<sup>4</sup> There was something uncomfortable in inadvertently courting this response, which appeared elitist in its assertion of unity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, audiences that were more liberal tended to give greater support for Remain than those audiences that were somewhat less liberal. This is illustrated in Figure 4. Although on the whole all of the audiences were fairly liberal, we can see from the upward slope of the line that support for Remain was somewhat higher among those audiences that

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<sup>4</sup> A similar point is made by the comedian Stewart Lee (2018) in *Content Provider*, as he mocks his audience after a pro-EU applause: 'That's right: clap the things you agree with. *Clap, clap, clap; agree, agree, agree*'.



were most liberal than those audiences that were less liberal. This follows a similar pattern seen at the national level in the actual referendum (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). These results indicate that the audience was comfortable in its status as liberal, and confident in voting to remain in the EU; moreover, audience members tended to be *both liberal and* supportive of remaining.

**Insert figure 4. Liberal audiences and support for Remain**

Despite the problematic nature of the audience's self-affirmation as Liberal Remainers, the results suggest that an optimistic view of possible futures can derive from identifying oneself as part of a community of voters, even when a minority position is confirmed by the results. Figure 5 shows a very strong correlation between audiences that believed 'they can make a difference' and support for Remain. This suggests that support for the losing side had done little to dampen their sense of political efficacy – or perhaps reveals a belief that the results of the referendum could be overturned.

**Insert figure 5. Audiences that 'can make a difference' and support for Remain**

Having been in the minority in the original referendum, this moment of artistically framed communal solidarity with other Remain voters could be argued to have positive social value. In the lead up to the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014, a number of theatre and performance events functioned as spaces for communal engagement with progressive politics, with a strong majority of attendees in support of independence (Bissell and Overend 2015). The same degree of creative and experimental participation was notably absent from the Brexit campaign and beyond social media, which many declared their use of, there were limited opportunities such as this to perform political allegiances.

Nonetheless, the assertion of majority victory here (albeit at odds with the national majority on this issue) was counter to the message of the play, which challenged the self-affirming qualities of some of the performances of the Scottish referendum and strove for a more complex engagement with opposing ideas. It is possible that the establishment of a dominant majority identity from the start of the play ('the majority has spoken') may have influenced or determined the ensuing votes in ways that were not immediately apparent.

Considering the role of abstention adds another factor to our understanding of this process. While the percentage of abstentions was not revealed, these data were still recorded and can be used here to understand how members of the out-group reacted when they felt themselves to be in a minority. It is important to recognise that abstention can result from a variety of voter positions, ranging from disenfranchisement to active rejection of the premise of the vote. This informs our interpretation of the data as we interpret levels of abstention over the course of the performances.

Although audiences with a high percentage of self-declared liberals were more likely to voice support for Remaining in the EU, the reverse was not straightforwardly the case with respect to support for Leave. From the left-hand panel of figure 6 we can see that the line of best fit is relatively flat. This indicates that there was not much difference between how liberal an audience was and their level of support for Leave. Instead, as the right hand panel shows, there was a strong relationship between how liberal an audience was and whether or not they abstained on this question. The line of best fit is much steeper and slopes down, which indicates that liberal audiences were much less likely to abstain on this question than audiences that identified as less liberal. This implies that many of the people in audiences that might have been expected to support Leave instead opted to abstain, perhaps because they felt uncomfortable or unwilling to voice (however anonymously) an opinion that they knew to be out of step with the majority as it was defined at the start of the play.

### Insert figure 6. Liberal audiences and support for Leave and abstention

Having narrowly voted to actively kill five non-violent neo-Nazis to save an individual who did not hold those views, comfortable in their identity as liberal Remainers, the audience now applauded their pro-EU position. The effect of this dynamic was to lead some to register their disagreement through abstention. While the precise results and effects of these votes were not anticipated, the creation of a powerful majority was clearly intentional. However, any sense of complacency or vindication in this majority identity was directly challenged by the narrative, which demonstrated that the feeling of being right is exactly the same as the feeling of being wrong (Drummond, 2017b, p. 42). The play therefore argues that we should constantly re-examine our political position in relation to those of others, considering alternative perspectives and remaining open to change and reassessment.

When the theatrical context is taken into consideration, another reading of abstention becomes possible, resulting from conflict between the distillation of meaning available through voting, and the 'saturation' of meaning generated by the theatre experience (Pearson & Shanks, 2001, p. 28). Discussing Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night*, James Frieze makes a distinction between the 'both/and' logic of theatre and the 'either/or' logic of electoral voting:

Even as we shroud them in an idealistic sense of democratic citizenship, in which we all have a free vote through which to express considered political judgements, elections are as much of a zero-sum game as any other form of poll or questionnaire. Votes for office enable the identification of winners or losers; referenda decide whether the answer is 'yes' or 'no'. Electoral voting, in material terms, tethers politics

to a logic of 'either/or'. Candidates thus attempt to promise certainty, guarantees, singular reassurance. They strive to take doubt (about the candidates, about the future) out of circulation. *Fight Night*, however, plays electoral logic against theatrical logic, which is a logic of 'both/and'. In theatre, characters and events are always both absent and present, literal and symbolic. Meaning is always in excess. Theatre trades in doubt, doubleness, duplicity, contradiction. (Frieze, 2015, p. 224)

In this formulation, it is possible to understand abstention as a rejection of the 'either/or' logic of voting in favour of the 'both/and' ethos that is maintained by a refusal to vote. This reading is supported by various critical personal accounts of a refusal to vote on the final proposition of *The Majority* ('This community believes that abusing someone for holding an opinion is a helpful thing to do') (Billington, 2017; Rebellato, 2017).<sup>5</sup> The conflict between these opposing logics also led to criticism of the final vote of von Schirach's *Terror*, with Kate Kellaway rejecting the 'crude' choice of the vote, and asking 'is it possible to be [both] guilty and not guilty?' (Kellaway, 2017). A concern with nuance and multiplicity is at the heart of these critical readings, echoing a wider dissatisfaction at the 'zero-sum' nature of contemporary politics.

In this context, it is important to recognise that for many, the decision not to vote at the end of *The Majority* was an active rejection of the premise of the performance event, serving as a recognition that the issues raised were more complex than the vote allowed. There is now a general recognition in participatory theatre scholarship that agency cannot be simply aligned with participation, and that a refusal or unwillingness to 'join in' can be every bit as active and engaged as enthusiastic compliance. For example, Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson reject 'sharp distinctions between participation (active, rebellious, critical) and

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<sup>5</sup> In early versions of the play, the word 'attack' was used in place of 'abuse'. This was changed in an attempt to close down ambiguity and suggest a harsher, more violent response seeded in Drummond's earlier conflicts with Eric Ferguson.

non-participation (passive, receptive, docile)' (2017, p. 4). As such discussions of participatory theatre acknowledge, spectatorship is already an active process (Rancière, 2011). The current trend for immersive and participatory theatre forms should therefore be understood as a novel framing of this dynamic, rather than a corrective to a supposedly passive relationship with performance.

## 7. Shouting across the void

The primary aim of this production was to counter the lack of nuance in the Brexit debate, and in British national politics more generally, by challenging the tendency to unequivocally dismiss the arguments of those on the other side. This was directed at the mostly liberal Remainers who comprised the majority of the audience, but it was also intended as an entreaty to those across the political spectrum to engage in meaningful discussion and remain open to alternative perspectives, avoiding the impulse to accuse, reject and lash out. Informal discussions with audience members, along with some of the media responses to the production, indicated that this message had an impact. For example, assuming a position that is arguably at odds with some of the more divisive Brexit-related content of her publisher, Georgina Brown (2017) writes in *The Mail on Sunday* that 'by the end I felt genuinely uncomfortable for automatically accusing Brexiteers of being racist bigots and crossing them off my Christmas card list'. While we are wary of presenting these individual accounts as evidence of political revelation in the audiences, when considered along with our following interpretation of the voting data, it may be possible to infer some degree of attitudinal change regarding the polarisation of positions on Brexit over the course of the production.

The story of the play centres around an incident in Aberdeen, in which, fuelled by alcohol and political zealotry, Drummond attacks a supposed neo-Nazi and is subsequently arrested. He eventually argues against such acts of aggression, entreating the audience to come together in voting against the proposition that 'this community believes that abusing someone for holding an opinion is a helpful thing to do'. In keeping with the other propositions, there is a certain ambiguity around the word 'abuse', which caused some members of the audience to reject this final vote (Rebellato, 2017). However, in the context of the narrative regarding Drummond's course of action in Aberdeen, 'abuse' implied an act of violence or aggression. Total consensus was not the aim here and indeed, as hoped, there was never 100% of the audience voting No at this point.

Across the 20 performances the average level of agreement with the final proposition was just 7 percent, with a low of 3 percent and a high of 15 percent. Most people rejected the proposition (68%) though a sizeable minority abstained (25%). The lack of complete consensus engendered by this final vote was avowed in Drummond's closing monologue, which then opened up into the aforementioned post-show dialogue outside the theatre.

One way of assessing the extent to which the audience responded to the play's ambition to foster more constructive forms of disagreement is to compare the initial level of support for the proposition that 'violence is sometimes the answer' at the beginning of the play to the subsequent level of support in the final vote for the proposition that 'abusing someone for holding an opinion is a helpful thing to do'. The earlier question on whether 'violence is sometimes the answer' divided people relatively evenly but on balance

audiences said no. It seems reasonable to assume that those audience members who said Yes would also be likely to believe that 'abusing someone for holding an opinion is a helpful thing to do'. A positive correlation was therefore expected. In fact, as Figure 7 shows there is no identifiable pattern and the line of best fit is flat.

### **Insert figure 7. Abusing someone is helpful**

As the play argues against the tendency to attack, the lack of a clear pattern in Figure 7 might suggest a shift in the perspective of those more inclined towards violent solutions. However, this shift may result from a complicity in the narrative trajectory of the event, adopting a move towards resolution that is explicitly encouraged by the performer. Furthermore, these shifts may result from a sense of playing a role in the play in a similar way to that identified by Tomlin in her discussion of Kaleider's *The Money* (2013). Speculating on the unfolding drama of the actions and decisions of 'real people' in these performances, Tomlin suggests that participants may have been 'consciously or unconsciously playing familiar characters in fictions drawn from classic dramatic frameworks' (2019, p. 246). In a similar way, the adoption of, or identification with, the role of enlightened protagonist may have informed votes at this point in *The Majority*. It is also important to note that the questions on violence asked at the beginning and the end of the performance were qualitatively different from one another – and were designed more for their dramatic impact on the narrative than to measure the effect of the play on attitudes towards violence. Notwithstanding these qualifications, we can identify a measure of attitudinal change by looking at the difference in support for violence expressed at the beginning of the play and the level of support for violence at the end of it. Whether or not

these results can be explained by an acquiescence to the trajectory of the event, it is nonetheless revealing that those audiences that were most prone to change their mind were also the audiences that identified as the most liberal, thereby suggesting an accurate understanding of this term. This is illustrated in Figure 8, which shows that there is a positive correlation between the two variables.

### **Insert figure 8. Disagree better and liberalism**

Unlike *Fight Night*, which foregrounded the rejection of the voting system by staging a mass audience walk-out, thereby leaving little doubt as to the number of abstainers, *The Majority* left this decision for individuals to consider as the final proposition was offered, and as mentioned previously, the percentage of abstainers was not displayed on the screens. This meant that the final display highlighted a stark division between those who believed that abusing someone was helpful, and those who did not. Prior to the vote, Drummond declared a hope for a No vote in keeping with the argument of the play. In an audience of up to 385, it was clear that this would never come in at 100%, and in the final section, this inevitable disagreement was presented as a positive political force: 'Because total agreement is the death of conversation. It's the end of thought' (Drummond, 2017b, p. 47). On this note, Drummond invited the audience to put down their voting pads and join him in the foyer to continue the debate on terms that moved beyond the binary of the votes. The final words of the play opened up a space for constructive disagreement, which aimed to counter any tendency to shout at each other across the void: 'Let's put down our voting pads and just ... talk, shall we? Come tell me why I'm right. Come tell me why I'm wrong. I promise, either way, I'll listen' (Ibid.).

## **8. Conclusion**



Voting is a specific form of audience participation that can either be accepted or rejected, whether through active withdrawal or non-engagement. The act of non-participation is avowed and incorporated into the text of *The Majority*, initiating a process of negotiation between agency and compliance; spectatorship and intervention; individuality and community. Abstention can result from disengagement and disenfranchisement, but it can also constitute an active and considered response to the offer to participate, which opens up a space for a paradoxical political efficacy.

In this article, we have understood abstention as a possible mode of audience participation that is potentially just as active as the YES and NO votes that were displayed on screens around the auditorium. The range of responses available to audiences of *The Majority* went beyond the simple options of the votes, incorporating a tacit and emotional engagement with the narrative and theatrical context of the play, and constituting the 'social performances' of voting, including various pleasures and frustrations as individual audience members negotiated their position in relation to the majority. Making use of the data generated from the votes, we have employed an innovative multi-method approach to analyse various audiences' responses, both within and across the performances. This has provided a series of insights into the motivation, critical engagement and participation of the National Theatre audiences as they responded to *The Majority*.

First, early in the performance, a series of 'quick-fire' votes determined that the demographic of the audience was mainly white, non-male and liberal; and that this liberal

identity did not correlate with support for absolute freedom of speech. These results were immediately summarised by Drummond, establishing a majority identity that for both the performance and this article provide a 'base-line' against which to measure subsequent results. Second, the escalating trolley problem scenarios revealed a complex negotiation of beliefs and ethical positions, which resulted in an increased level of abstention indicating, for some, an unwillingness to make an active declaration of intent. This emphasised the active and critical dimensions of abstention, which had significant bearing on our interpretation of the final proposition. Third, the final trolley proposition presented a choice between doing nothing and killing no one; or pulling a lever to kill a non-violent neo-Nazi. That a significant proportion of the audience (albeit a minority) voted to commit murder, highlighted that in some circumstances, violence is considered by some to be an appropriate response to far-right ideologies, even when this remains at the level of opinion and is not manifested in violent action by its proponents. *The Majority* set out to challenge this position, but ended with a call to debate and a promise to listen to opposing views. Fourth, we considered abstention as an act of conscientious withdrawal. A refusal to vote on the final proposition on abusing someone for holding an opinion was understood as an active rejection of the 'either/or' logic of the vote, in favour of the 'both/and' logic of theatre. Finally, we ascertained a degree of attitudinal change by comparing the early vote on the occasional value of violence to the final vote on the validity of abusing someone for holding an opinion. The lack of correlation here, read in conjunction with critical accounts of the audience experience, suggested that some members of the audience were reconsidering their original position.

While these insights may reveal something about the way that voters perform their politics during elections and referenda, we have been careful to consider the 'social performances' of voting in theatre as a distinct social practice. We have suggested that the heterotopic qualities of political theatre may have a significant effect on the way that audiences receive an invitation to participate through voting. Nevertheless, through this analysis of *The Majority*, we have argued for the value of theatre as a space to continually engage with challenging political quandaries, encounter problematic or difficult ideas, and crucially, to reflect and reassess one's own beliefs and convictions.

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